

**GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA  
DEPARTMENT OF YOUTH REHABILITATION SERVICES**



**Testimony of  
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Director  
Department of Youth Rehabilitation Services**

**Committee on Human Services  
Public Oversight Hearing  
Wednesday, June 10, 2009**

Good morning Chairman Wells and members of the Committee. Thank you for inviting me to appear before the Committee and the public to address the recent escape and safe return of a youth from the New Beginnings Youth Development Center ("New Beginnings"), provide data on DYRS escapes and abscondences, share how the New Beginnings facility operates, and outline proactive and corrective measures taken by DYRS to prevent these occurrences in the future.

First, let me provide you with the details currently available of the escape that occurred on Saturday, May 30<sup>th</sup> and the safe return of the youth to secure custody on Monday, June 1<sup>st</sup>, 2009. At approximately 8:30 p.m. on May 30<sup>th</sup> -- 10 days after we had moved youth into the facility and 2 days after it was fully occupied -- while youth were being escorted to the Medical Unit for their evening medication, two youth ran in different directions, both running toward the fence. One youth was captured as he attempted to climb the fence; but unfortunately staff was unable to apprehend the second youth.

Consistent with procedure, our staff immediately notified the Anne Arundel County Police, the National Park Police, and the Metropolitan Police Department. A search of the grounds ensued within minutes with the assistance of Anne Arundel County Police and the Park Police, including the use of a helicopter over the grounds in Laurel. Also, a custody order was requested for the youth's arrest. MPD was provided with the youth's home location, as well as other locations which DYRS was aware the youth frequented in DC, and patrol car searches for this youth were prioritized. Simultaneously, the youth's mother was contacted and she was able to confirm for staff the locations that he is known to frequent. DYRS also worked with the MPD K9 Division searching the Laurel campus grounds for the runaway youth in the days following the escape.

On Sunday May 31<sup>st</sup>, the DYRS executive team and the New Beginnings administration met on the grounds of New Beginnings to debrief, strategize and plan immediate next steps for the safety and security of both youth and staff. These steps included making necessary corrections to the fence line, ensuring all emergency response protocols and procedures were in place, and arranging additional training of New Beginnings employees. DYRS management also met with union representatives on grounds on May 31<sup>st</sup> to obtain their input on security measures.

On Monday, June 1<sup>st</sup>, David Muhammad, DYRS's Chief of Committed Services, John Mein, our MPD Liaison and Special Projects Coordinator, and Fred Rogers, DYRS' Revocation Specialist along with patrols from the Metropolitan Police Department, were surveilling the youth's known

hangouts when he was identified and captured without incident. I'd like to take a moment to acknowledge the three DYRS staff who went above and beyond the call of duty and apprehended this youth, along with a guard from Hawk One security who helped bring the youth into custody. The youth was immediately transported to the Youth Services Center on Mt. Olivet Road where he remains in locked custody. DYRS' internal investigation into the escape is in process.

Any escape from a locked facility is inexcusable and I am here today to say that I take full responsibility for the escape and apologize to the residents of the District of Columbia and Laurel, whose safety I take very seriously. Any escape is regrettable, but this escape, coming so swiftly upon the opening of our new facility about which staff, families, youth, the community and I were all very excited, is especially inopportune, regrettable and, frankly, embarrassing. Without attempting to make any excuses, I believe that the June 2 *Washington Post* editorial got it right when they wrote, "security experts tell us that such breakdowns are not unusual in the shakedown of opening a new facility" and since May 31, I've heard numerous stories about first month problems such as this in new facility openings. These include accounts of several escapes that occurred from Missouri's juvenile facilities, as well as the Deputy Attorney General of Florida talking about how he had opened a jail in Florida some years ago and within the first month had an escape by an inmate held on homicide charges. Again, I point this out *not* as a justification or excuse, but to place this occurrence in perspective as we examine the recent history of the District's juvenile escapes and abscondences.

While the history of Oak Hill was plagued with escapes, there has been only one other escape during my administration in January 2006 from a satellite unit to Oak Hill, during which three youth escaped and were returned to the facility within hours. There has never been an escape from the Youth Services Center during the more than 4 years it has been in operation.

By contrast, the old Oak Hill facility was plagued with escapes. Escapes were so frequent that, according to several *Washington Post* articles, *one in six youths escaped from Oak Hill in 2002, and in a one year period from 1988 to 1989, 319 youth escaped from the facility and its annex*. Escapes became so commonplace that one Laurel resident told the *Washington Post* “When we hear a siren, the first thing we think is that there's been an escape.”

With respect to abscondances, which are generally run-aways from group homes, residential treatment or independent living, in 2003, an appalling 26 percent of all youth committed to YSA, DYRS’ predecessor agency, were on abscondance status. Since that time, as you know, the percentage of youth on abscondance has declined significantly, to the point where today approximately 7% of youth under DYRS supervision are on abscondance status, and almost all of them have absconded from group homes or from home, not from locked facilities. This reduction has occurred despite the fact that the number of youth committed to our care has increased dramatically during this time. So to put this in perspective, in 2003 there were approximately 383 youth under DYRS supervision and 102 were on abscondance status, or 26%. Today, there are 740 youth under DYRS

supervision, and approximately 50 are on abscondance status at any given time, a figure which fluctuates daily and has been as low as 31 in recent months.

Of the 50 youth on abscondance today, 22 did not actually abscond from a placement but were living at home and have failed to sufficiently maintain contact with their case manager so a Custody Order was issued for them. DYRS has increased the number of contacts case workers must have with youth and have increased the accountability of our staff so some of these Custody Orders may not be an increase in failure to make contact, but may be the result of heightened scrutiny on case managers by DYRS management.

What this all means is that today, 28 youth on DYRS' caseload have run away from a placement, and we are seeking them jointly with our Absconder's unit, the Alliance of Concerned Men, and MPD. This works out to 3.8% of the youth committed to our care.

Several measures were put in place to reduce our abscondance rate. DYRS hired two full-time staff to locate youth on abscondance (our "Absconders' Unit), entered into an MOU with MPD to establish a joint agency Absconders Unit, co-located DYRS staff with MPD and Court Social Services Abscondance Unit, and entered into a contract with the Alliance of Concerned Men to create the Returning Our Youth (ROY) program to help find youth on abscondance. The diligent efforts of DYRS and our agency and community partners demonstrate a marked improvement and I wish to

take this opportunity to commend DYRS employees and our partners for their track record in this area.

In the past six months or so DYRS has been working much more closely with MPD and we are currently finalizing a Memorandum of Agreement to streamline the process of issuing Custody Orders so officers can begin looking for youth on abscondance immediately. In addition, we have been working to further improve the process of safely returning youth on abscondance status to our custody, an effort which began before the recent incident at New Beginnings.

With the launching of the new innovative Regional Service Coalitions, DYRS anticipates an even further decline in our abscondance rate. One of the responsibilities of the Regional Service Coalitions will be to help locate and bring back into custody youth on abscondance. It is much easier for community organizations that have an established relationship with a youth to talk them back in, than it is for those out looking for youth who do not know them. Also, since the Service Coalition members will be regionalized, i.e. in the youth's own neighborhoods, they will have a much better understanding of where the youth's hang out, who their friends are, where their various relatives live and will have established relationships with all of those people which will greatly add to the kind of information needed to bring a youth back into care. Finally, since all of these programs will have a vendor relationship with DYRS, confidentiality issues will not be a bar to information sharing.

We believe the Regional Service Coalitions will also provide higher quality of services to youth, which will also reduce abscondance – as youth generally are more likely to run from placements they don't like or that aren't meeting their needs.

I am especially grateful that this Roundtable provides me with an opportunity to assure this Committee and the public that the New Beginnings facility is safe and secure for both staff and residents. I can also state unreservedly that the New Beginnings Youth Development Center, by design, is the best juvenile justice facility in the country. We believe it not only provides a secure environment in which to house the troubled youth who are referred to DYRS, but also provides the kind of rehabilitative milieu that will protect the public not only while youth are confined there, but afterwards as well while our staff and community partners help turn their lives around.

### **REFERENCE POWERPOINT SLIDES, FACILITY DESIGN AND INITIAL SECURITY AND SAFETY MEASURES**

Let me now delineate the security and safety measures that DYRS put into place immediately following the escape:

1. Conducted a de-briefing with New Beginnings staff and youth on Sunday, May 31 to re-emphasize all safety and security protocols and ensure all safety measures were in place;
2. Issued, posted, and distributed Post Orders on Emergency Response and Escapes to clarify and reaffirm protocol regarding the pursuit and apprehension of youth who have escaped secure custody, but are still on the Laurel Campus (DYRS policy and post orders are incorporated into my testimony as Exhibits A and B)

3. Conducted a staff training on the Post Orders for Supervisory Youth Development Representatives and Team Leaders on Wednesday, June 3; on Thursday June 4, Supervisory Youth Development Representatives and Team Leaders, in turn, conducted training with YDR staff
4. Met with Union officials to get their recommendations and sought their assistance with facilitating communications to all union members
5. Made all agreed-upon changes in staffing levels to ensure adequate staffing and positioning when youth movement is occurring on the grounds
6. Conducted a security audit and compiled a list of security recommendations, with consultation by 2 nationally respected security experts
7. Instituted a procedural requirement that all distribution of medications scheduled after dark be conducted in the housing units
8. Instructed all transportation and maintenance staff to roll up all windows and lock all doors to all government vehicles parked in or around New Beginnings, and
9. Requested OPM assistance in securing the Oak Hill facility

**REFERENCE POWER POINT SLIDES, ADDITIONAL SECURITY PRECAUTIONS BELOW:**

10. Posted a Youth Development Representative permanently at the perimeter gatehouse 24 hours-a-day/seven days a week
11. Installed razor wire on the fencing to all emergency exit gates, sally ports, and on both places where the fencing meets a building
12. Ordered five feet of additional anti-climb fencing throughout the main campus and football field
13. Made all housing unit panic bars even more secure by adding additional screws



#### 14. Placed additional anti-climb flashing on ledge on gymnasium

Future priorities include 1) conducting emergency preparedness training, 2) considering the addition of “candy cane” fencing throughout the campus, 3) meeting with Anne Arundel, Park Police and MPD and other law enforcement entities to debrief on coordinating law enforcement activities, and 4) ongoing meetings with Union officials. I am also glad to say that our responses thus far seem to be having the desired effect. Not surprisingly, in the days following the escape many youth on campus were actively contemplating how they might also escape, and a couple of youth made efforts to do so – sort of a “copy cat” effect that is seen in many unhealthy juvenile behaviors – but were unable to successfully scale the fence.

Further, as there are with any secure juvenile facilities, there have continued to be other incidents with youth at New Beginnings. So we had an opening barbecue, which was very enjoyable and which was attended by youths’ families, along with numerous community members like Judge Zoe Bush, Court Social Services Director Terri Odom and Director of the Criminal Justice Coordinating Council, Nancy Ware. At the end of that event a fight broke out between a few youth and it was immediately quelled. There have been incidents with other youth getting out of their units inside the secure perimeter. But overall, I’m happy to say that the facility is working the way it was designed to work. In fact, while it is way too early to report data with any degree of reliability since it is such a short period of time, there are already indications that overall and serious incidents are declining in New Beginnings vs. Oak Hill.

In closing, let me reiterate that any escape from a locked facility is inexcusable, and I am here today to say that I take full responsibility for the escape and we are taking active measures to ensure that the risk of future escapes is minimized. But I also want to be sure that in the midst of this incident we recognize there is much that is positive which has occurred: As was reported by many news outlets following the closure of Oak Hill and the opening of the new facility, this is a new day for juvenile justice in the District of Columbia. We have moved from a facility and practice that was deemed inhumane to a terrific state of the art program and home like environment for our youth – and though we had an unfortunate incident in the first week of the opening, the transition otherwise went very smoothly and staff and youth are adjusting very well to the new surroundings. I particularly want to thank all of the DYRS staff who worked incredibly hard to make the transition to the new facility. Also, I am absolutely confident that the new facility and evolving program will provide the kind of treatment and rehabilitation that has been sought for decades but is only now becoming a reality, and the community at-large will surely benefit particularly as it relates to public safety and the changed lives of our young people. And significant progress is already being seen: As DYRS has diverted some youth with less serious offenses to community based services, their recidivism<sup>\*</sup> rate has declined by 19%. This has allowed the Department to focus secure care on the youth who have committed more serious offenses, quadrupling the time they spend in secure custody, but in a much smaller and more rehabilitative setting. Reconvictions of youth

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<sup>\*</sup> Recidivism here is defined as a new adjudication (conviction) within one year of placement in the community.

leaving our new model units at Oak Hill, modeled on the approach they use in the state of Missouri, have already been cut in half, from 33% of those who left Oak Hill in 2005 to 16% of those who left Oak Hill in 2007. This means our communities are safer and our young people are more likely to become contributing members of our communities.

I believe it is critical at this time that we all recognize that the opening of New Beginnings and the soon to be launched Service Coalitions are a tremendous step forward towards accomplishing the recommendations and goals sought by many stakeholders for decades. As I have stated in previous testimony before this Committee, while I am not satisfied with where we are yet, I am extremely encouraged by the progress that has been made over the past four years both within DYRS and by the juvenile justice system in the District more generally, and I believe that by keeping our noses to the grindstone the District has within its reach not only a system of which we can all be proud, but one which is increasingly being viewed by others as a system worth emulating nationwide.

As always, thank you for your attention and I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.